

VZCZCXR06216
OO RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHSK #0221 0871353
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 271353Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY MINSK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7066
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RHMFISI/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC

C O N F I D E N T I A L MINSK 000221

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/26/2018

TAGS: BO KPAO PHUM PINR PREL

SUBJECT: BKGB MAKES UNPRECEDENTED ATTACK ON FREE PRESS

REF: A. MINSK 219

1B. MINSK 217

Classified By: Charge Jonathan Moore for reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (SBU) Independent media report a massive nationwide crackdown against the independent media in Belarus. According to one press source, the BKGB are searching the offices of representatives of foreign-based media outlets including USAID-funded European Radio for Belarus (ERB), Radio Racija, and TV Belsat in Minsk, Gomel, Grodno, Vitebsk, Brest, Bobruysk and Beryoza. In at least one case, according to the press service of the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) and Charter97, the basis for the search was the Belarusian Criminal Code statute prohibiting defamation of the president.

¶2. (C) Zhanna Litvina, Chair of the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) characterized the crackdown for A/DCM as "an unprecedented attempt to scare journalists and to create barriers to access to objective information." Litvina said that various means including courts and police had been used to intimidate journalists in the past, the fact that today's searches and interrogations were conducted by the BKGB was a novelty. She added that many journalists had been called in to the BKGB for questioning and that the searches had included the confiscation of computers and other materials. (Note: Litvina was careful not to use the word "detention," though other sources like the human rights NGO Charter97 said journalists were detained. End note.) According to Litvina, BAJ was calling on international journalists' associations, European institutions and foreign embassies to protest this action to the Belarusian authorities.

Comment

¶3. (C) Apparently the Lukashenko regime is unwilling to let the recent up-tick in harassment of the free press end with the beatings and arrests of a few journalists March 25 (ref A). We agree with Litvina that the use of the KGB -- as Minsk's Locally Employed Staff have experienced -- is an attempt to frighten independent actors into submission (ref B). Post will investigate the possibility of use of the Global Human Rights Defenders Fund for the replacement of the stolen material.

Moore
MOORE